

A Primitive Community in an Urban Setting

The Pardhis in Mumbai

PAANKHI AGRAWAL, GAURANG R SAHAY

This paper analyses the economic life of the Pardhis, a denotified tribal community, in the light of field data collected from a non-regularised slum area, known as Jai Ambe Nagar, in an eastern suburb of Mumbai. It looks at the various elements that constitute the organisation of economic life of Pardhis in this enclave. It also reflects on the social embeddedness of the Pardhi's economic life by analysing the relationship of their economic life with sociocultural institutions of the community, particularly the kinship system. There are tendencies of forced adaptation to the plurality of forces unleashed by the urban setting or urbanism that has not resulted into significant changes in their traditional institutions and practices. Structures and normative orientations of the traditional order still persist among them and on many occasions get reinforced due to the interplay of different urban situations.

Based on intensive fieldwork in an enclave of Pardhi households settled in a non-regularised slum area, known as Jai Ambe Nagar, in the eastern suburb of Mumbai, this paper describes the elements that constitute the organisation of the economic life of these families in an urban setting. Pardhis are commonly known as an “ex-criminal tribe” or “denotified tribe” and officially designated as “a most primitive scheduled tribe”. We have attempted to analyse the relationship of their economic life with sociocultural institutions of the community, particularly the kinship system. This paper seeks to contribute to the prevailing social anthropological or sociological understanding of economic structures and processes and their unfolding amidst a network of social relations (Granovetter and Swedberg 2001).

Colonialism and Racist Ideology

The term tribe as a conceptual category was created by the colonial state to brand a large section of the colonised as “savage”, “barbaric”, “primitive”, “technologically simple and low-skilled” and “kinship-based” in contrast to the morally and materially superior, western societies, and posit them as the other of the colonial self (Kuper 1988; Vail 1989). Thus, the origin of the term tribe is intricately linked to orientalism,¹ colonialism and the accompanying racist ideology. Such construction of alterity was obviously used for hegemonic purposes and for consolidation of colonial rule. The postcolonial state has inexplicably retained the term tribe with similar connotations and it is being used in the usual fashion for the purpose of creating alterities. Following this, there has been a widespread and consistent attempt to position the tribal society allochronistically,² as existing before the “great transformation”,³ thereby reinforcing the colonial essentialist construction of tribe.

In the Indian context, these alterities have strongly infiltrated both administrative and academic arenas. Tribes in the official discourse of post-Independent India are those communities which are included in the list of scheduled tribes (ST) in the Constitution.⁴ Though there are no criteria specified in the Constitution to identify tribes, the list was prepared on the basis of commonly accepted criteria such as indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with other community at large, low level of technological advancement, lack of specialisation, a high degree of communal possession of land and other means of production, non-acquisitive value system, and absence of economic hierarchy.⁵ In this teleological construction, tribal

Paankhi Agrawal (paankhi.agrawal@gmail.com) is a research student in the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi and Gaurang R Sahay (gaurangsahay@gmail.com) is professor in the Centre for Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

sociopolitical economy is represented as a much lower stage of economic development. Furthermore, tribes are considered to be always located in spaces identified as rural. That is why the policy framework which is oriented towards supporting tribal communities in India such as the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) (PESA) Act 1996 or the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 is largely restricted to rural areas.

The essentialised ideal-typical construct of “tribe” has led to a common assumption that tribes do not or cannot exist in the urban space. Consequently, the existence and tribulations of the tribal communities who have come to occupy an urban space largely remain an invisible phenomenon (Srivastava 2008, Ganguly 1986).⁶ For example, Meena Radhakrishna writes that traditionally the Banjaras are an itinerant tribal community who have been found settling, in recent times, in various parts of the country. A number of them have settled in Delhi. However, the Government of Delhi, following the essentialised imagery, refused to record them as a tribal community and listed them under the scheduled caste (sc) category (Radhakrishna 2007: 59). As a result, tribal communities in urban areas have largely remained neglected in social science research. This paper is a modest attempt to overcome this long-term neglect. It is also necessitated by the fact that in recent times, various dynamic processes underlying development such as the shift from agrarian economy to an industrial one, mechanisation, large-scale development of infrastructure, commercialisation, urbanisation, growth in communication and transportation have adversely affected the traditional livelihood of various tribal communities and their access to hitherto common property resources. Therefore, they have been migrating to predominantly non-tribal areas including representative urban spaces in search of livelihood and thereby exposing themselves to the vagaries and difficulties of urban life and getting incorporated into the larger capitalist system. Consequently, radical changes are taking place in their socio-economic and cultural lifeworlds in such a way that they are outgrowing their so-called essentialised “primitiveness”.

One of the urban spaces to which the Pardhis migrated is Mumbai. It is likely that Pardhis shared a link to the city before Independence considering that many had been under the Criminal Tribe Act, put in settlements near the industrial units that were being set up in the regions surrounding Mumbai. While academic studies on the Pardhis are conspicuous by their near-absence, the community has received a larger space in mass media. Our review of 21 news reports for this study shows that the reports are flimsy to say the least while also misrepresenting the Pardhi life and culture. They invariably project thieving and robbing by murder as a normal and recurring feature of the livelihood-seeking efforts among the Pardhis, and highlight the historicity of illegalities associated with the Pardhi community. Crimes committed by the Pardhis are attributed to the normative structures of the community and established as a social fact or part of their collective conscience in the common-sense world of the consumers of news. Further, the media reports hardly investigate the organisation of the

sociopolitical and economic life of the Pardhis. Thus, by projecting crime as an expression of social fact among Pardhis and without inquiring into their socio-economic and political life, including their effort into reconstituting a space for themselves in a dynamic urban milieu, the mass media effectively implies a certain identity to the Pardhi community and contributes to the reinforcing of misconceptions and prejudice against them. The result has been the strengthening of the essentialised imageries about a tribal community. It is in this context that this paper attempts to understand the sociology of the economic life of the Pardhi community settled in a suburban area of Mumbai. It is hoped that besides contributing to intellectual debate, the knowledge generated through this study can help build a programmatic agenda for the development and welfare of the Pardhis.

Methodology

Jai Ambe Nagar comprises 170 households belonging to different ethnic communities. Pardhis constitute 45 households and are a fairly visible community. Pardhis are also located in other parts of Mumbai region, particularly in suburban slum areas. According to the 2001 Census, their total population in Mumbai is 2,083. However, this figure is doubtful and maybe a severe underestimation. A mapping exercise conducted in 2007 by the Xavier's Institute of Social Research, Mumbai, pitches the number of Pardhis in Mumbai region at around 11,000. Kale, Chauvhan, Shinde, Bhosle, Pawar are the popular cognomens within Pardhis in Mumbai or Maharashtra. Jai Ambe Nagar is a slum area in the eastern suburb known as Mankhurd and falls under ward M (west) or Chembur west of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). According to the Mumbai Human Development Report 2009, ward M (west) is the third-most backward ward out of Mumbai's 24 wards. The human development index value for this ward is 0.33 as against the average index value of 0.56 for Mumbai. The two wards which figure below M (west) on the human development index are L or Kurla and M (east) or Chembur east with 0.29 and 0.05 value, respectively. Ward D has the highest human development index value, i.e., 0.96 (MHDR 2009).

Our fieldwork stretched over 14 months from December 2008 to February 2010 but without a constant participatory observation of the field. The frequency of visits was not consistent throughout the duration of the study. The first few months were spent in getting acquainted with the community through informal conversations and for the enumeration exercise that helped in developing rapport-building which, in turn, served as a base for trust-building and comfort-enhancing mechanisms in the field. In-depth interviews were conducted at different points of time along the length of the study. But the collection of quantitative data by using a structured interview schedule happened in a compact slot during October-November 2009, since the temporal context of data collection has a bearing on information regarding economic activity, consumption expenditure and status of indebtedness. The household was the unit of data collection and the respondent was an adult member of the household. Involvement in the community as a

participant observer was most demanding during the two months that followed the demolition of the Jai Ambe Nagar settlement in September 2009 since it was termed an unauthorised colony by the authorities.

'Criminal Tribe' to 'Scheduled Tribe'

Much of the historical understanding of Pardhis is based on the anthropological-cum-administrative accounts of the colonial period. One of these accounts tells us that the Pardhis, like other wandering communities, "have a large number of endogamous groups, varying lists being often given in different areas" (Russell and Lal 1975: 360). Among these groups are the Raj Pardhis, Phanse Pardhis, Chittar-Pardhis, Gai-Pardhis, Gaon-Pardhis, Shikari or Bhil Pardhis, Langoti Pardhis, Phase Pardhis, Takankars Pardhis and Takias Pardhis. These groups have settled in different states. In Maharashtra, according to the 2001 Census, their total population is 1,59,875. In states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the most notable group is that of the Phanse Pardhis (Sangave 1967: 67).

According to the colonial accounts, Pardhis have traditionally been a group of hunters or food gatherers, hunting small game all over the countryside. Besides using the catch for self-consumption, it also provided them with goods with which they engaged in reciprocity and, later, in exchange with other social groups (Russell and Lal 1975; Bokil 2002: 151; Sangave 1967: 69; Singh 1994: 990). The accounts also present the Pardhis as service providers. There are many instances of villagers employing them to keep vigil over crops and to keep grazing animals out of the farms for which they received wages in kind (Russell and Lal 1975: 396). The Pardhis also provided specialised services to the wider society. The Takankars from Maharashtra used to roughen stones of the household-based grinding mills. They used to move from one village to another to sell this service (Singh 1994: 991). According to Milind Bokil, Pardhis were also dependent on supplementary activities like begging and petty thefts (Bokil 2002). Much of the theft indulged in by them was restricted to a few ears of corn, fruit, harvested grain and similar products, which was termed "subsistence thieving" by Stephen Fuchs (1974: 107). Nevertheless, petty thefts were termed crimes in the colonial records. Colonial accounts commonly carried descriptions of the modus operandi of committing such activities by the Pardhis.

In 1871, the colonial government passed the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) that notified around 150 communities including Pardhis as criminal tribes, implying that these communities were criminal by birth and practised crime as a profession. The ostensible purpose of the Act was to maintain law and order, but it proved to be an effective means of converting hundreds of itinerant communities into groups of subjects to be placed under constant supervision. The law gave the local government extensive powers to brand, control, punish and segregate the communities. The colonial strategy vis-à-vis the "criminal tribes" changed from time to time. One of the strategies focused on settling them down by offering them underpaid manual jobs. The strategy was operationalised by establishing agricultural

and industrial settlements. The real motivation behind establishing agricultural settlements was to raise income by making large tracts of wasteland cultivable by extracting rigorous labour from them. Thus, the gradual transformation of Pardhis into wage labour particularly agricultural wage labour, during the colonial period is closely associated with the process of turning them into a "criminal tribe" (Krishan 2005).

While the system of agricultural settlements gradually disintegrated, industrial settlements came to be seen as a viable strategy to tie wage work to the economic ends of the colonial scheme in India. The criminal tribes were settled near private enterprises such as cotton mills, mines, quarries, sugar factories and so on. This was largely meant to provide a steady flow of cheap labour to enterprises. In the Bombay presidency, many notified communities were settled in the vicinity of textile mills. Pardhis constituted the single-largest community in the settlements and the free colonies.⁷ Force was a regular way of getting the criminal tribes to work in these enterprises with very poor wages and miserable working conditions. These settlements were effectively jails where the criminal tribes were detained for an indefinite period. Thus, the settlements proved to be sites of transformation of the itinerant communities into groups of wage labour and ultimately into storehouses of unfree or bonded labour (Krishan 2005: 88). Reflecting on this Radhakrishna (2001: 21) writes,

the processes of changing from an itinerant community to a forcedly settled one; from being considered useful members of society to being declared predators and criminals; and then transition from agricultural workers to industrial workers was a severely traumatic one for the (criminalised) community...The social and cultural resources gathered over generations were wiped out with the violence of change that each of these stages implied, in terms of a system of relationships and other social balances which sustain community life.

A public critique of the Criminal Tribe Act was a part of mainstream discussion during the freedom struggle. After Independence, the Act was repealed in 1952. Henceforth, the category of "criminal tribes" became "denotified tribes". After the acquisition of a new label, the Pardhis officially became equal citizens of the country but they continued to remain among the most depressed sections of society. Therefore, they were scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution for special government privileges, programmes and policies, and were designated as a ST. However, the de-notification and re-categorisation process remained only at the legal and bureaucratic level. It has not translated into a change of mind-set on the part of the state or of the non-tribal people generally. In reality the older prejudiced mind-set relating to the tribal peoples has remained (Devvy 2006).

Despite all the official announcements, policies and programmes, the livelihood situation among Pardhis remained precarious in post-Independent India. To illustrate the nature of government intervention, Vilas Sangave (1967) studied a rehabilitation project started by the Government of Bombay in 1952. Its aim was to promote the settlement of Pardhis and encourage them to cultivate the allotted government land on a cooperative basis so that they could improve their economic condition and get dissociated from alleged criminal activities.

Sangave found that the Pardhis could not take favourably to agriculture. To quote him,

They have not developed a liking for agriculture...on the contrary they reveal a definite inclination towards carrying out miscellaneous occupations like dairy, poultry-keeping, joining steel pipes, fine metal breaking, and employment in textile mills of engineering workshops. They have shown proficiency in such activities and their merit has been recognised (Sangave 1967: 90-91).

It was on the basis of this observation that Sangave suggested that the Pardhis should be trained for technical work and be absorbed in the burgeoning engineering and sugar industries of Kolhapur (Sangave 1967: 92). Consequently, the Maharashtra government started focusing on less radical measures of economic rehabilitation such as provision of education and skills training and alternative employment opportunities. However, the government's failure to bring about any significant improvement in the lives of the Pardhi community was clearly established in 1975-76, when they were recognised as "the poorest of poor amongst the Scheduled Tribes" and termed as a "primitive tribal group". A recent study by Ram Rathod and Vasant Bashra (2009) shows that notwithstanding new recognition and special attention from the government, the current socio-economic situation of the Pardhis in Tuljapur tehsil in Osmanabad district in Maharashtra has remained as dismal as ever. According to the study, only 1.21% of Pardhi families there possess land. No single activity ensures them the means of sustenance. Most families are engaged in guarding farms or in daily wage labour, while some still hunt for the purpose of exchanging the game to earn their livelihood. Around 38% of the families are seasonal migrants, many of whom migrate to Pune, Mumbai and other big cities in search of wage work. Some are engaged in illegal activities like bootlegging, and many Pardhi children supplement family income by begging. The literacy rate among them is as low as 6.65%. Economic deprivation coincides with social exclusion of the community. The Pardhis are forced to maintain conspicuous physical distance from other groups in the village (Rathod and Bashra 2009).

With the displacement of their traditional livelihoods, increasing obsolescence of their skills and consequently appalling economic situation, the Pardhis started facing a severe shortage of food and began to shift towards alternative occupations (Radhakrishna 2009: 15). Accordingly, many of them migrated to urban areas. Migration to the city implies not only physical relocation, but also a change in their approach to life which is reflected in the nature of their work and change in the economic and social organisation. Adaptation to a changed milieu has led to radical and rapid alterations in their control over resources and economic choices regarding their deployment, especially of their labour resources. On the other hand, in the wake of rapid changes in their economic life, social relations have also been reshaped.

Economic Life

This section primarily talks about work opportunity, types or nature of work, work schedule, organisation of economic activity, sources of income, consumption expenditure and

standard of living, asset ownership, and borrowing and indebtedness among the Pardhis in the field study area.

Organisation of Economic Activity

Working members of the Pardhi households number 81 totally. It was found that during the period of 30 days preceding the date of data collection, out of the 81 members, 31 (38.27%) were in the labour force and most of them were males. Around 84% of the labour force was employed for less than 15 days during the reference period. Actually, the average number of working days for those participating in the labour force was nine days during the 30 days reference period. This shows severe under-utilisation of the labour power of the Pardhis. Scarcity of work opportunity was a persistent and common complaint among the Pardhis during our entire period of fieldwork.

Casual wage labour is the predominant form of employment. It was observed during the fieldwork that most of the Pardhi labourers are engaged in construction activities and gutter desiltation work. The main types of construction-related work undertaken are digging the earth and breaking stones for the purpose of construction of roads and laying cable lines for private telecom companies. Gutter desiltation is a public work and the employer is invariably the BMC. Wages received are according to daily or periodic work (daily wages) or according to amount of work completed within a specified period of time (piece wages).

The other observable economic activity in which the Pardhis are engaged is scrap collection and rag picking. However, none of the Pardhis referred to this activity as their principal means of livelihood. This means that rag picking is seen either as a subsidiary activity or a last resort option by all households and it is also an indicator of acute shortage of wage work opportunity. Even the adult women and the children who are usually not in the labour force take up rag picking to augment the family income once in a while. In fact, participation of the Pardhi children in the livelihood earning activities is more common. A number of them regularly contribute to the family income through begging. While four families openly acceded to engaging in this arrangement, the others denied it. However, private conversations with Pardhi informants, *balwadi* (kindergarten) teachers and members of other communities confirmed this reality. This apart, children were also found to be engaged in activities like taking care of siblings or looking after domestic chores while parents go to work, thereby indirectly supporting the household economy at the cost of their education.

Pardhi households are engaged in multiple economic activities throughout the year, and an economic calendar is discernible. From end of January until end of May or the beginning of monsoon, the economic activity is at its peak. Most of the workers reported satisfactory level of availability of work during this period. October to January is a slack period in terms of availability of work opportunity which gets reflected in the significant reduction in the average number of working days within the community. The availability of work during June to September or the monsoon months is average. For the Pardhis in Jai Ambe Nagar, the main source of wage work during the monsoon is

gutter desiltation. But the income derived from this activity is not sufficient to meet their daily expenses so they also take to supplementary self-employment activities like making toys to be sold at wholesale rates to shopkeepers and selling balloons and garlands at different sites within the city, particularly during public festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Dussehra.

The economic activity undertaken by the Pardhis is also contingent on the level of skills among them and their ownership of working tools. The labourers own simple construction tools such as lump hammer, mattock, pickaxe, shovel spades, iron pans, mortar and stones and wheelbarrows which they use for the purpose of wage work. These tools require minimum maintenance and are not dependent on fuel or electricity. Every household has its own set of tools; their number depends on how many working members are there within the household.

The skills that Pardhis require for their work are learnt from their family members or relatives. Learning these low level skills does not require formal education. The adult literacy rate is only 13.95% and among the Pardhi youths only 16.67% are literate. This shows that there has not been any intergenerational improvement in their educational status. Combined with abject poverty, the lack of education and low-level of skills prevent them from moving from the informal to the formal sector or even up the occupational hierarchy within the informal sector.

There is no commonality of preference vis-à-vis work among Pardhi workers. Some favour digging (largely piece-wage work) because it fetches a better income. Gutter desiltation work is preferred by others because it is less physically arduous and can simultaneously be supplemented by other income-generating activities like scavenging to gather rags, pieces of plastic and discarded metals which, when sold, translate into earnings of around Rs 50 daily. This is not a small amount for a family wherein the couple together may be employed for around Rs 150 daily. None of the Pardhis expressed a preference for self-employment activities like selling balloons and self-made toys. This is primarily because it requires an initial investment for purchasing raw materials. Moreover, it does not yield them significantly greater income. It is the non-availability of adequate wage work that pushes them to self-employment activities. Rag picking is a more favoured form of self-employment for some since it allows for flexibility of work timings, remuneration is on-the-spot and the work itself is less physically challenging, though it may require one to travel long distances. There were no significant gender differences in the expressed preferences.

The Mukaddam

The Pardhis have been working only in the unorganised sector. But they do not directly participate in this sector. Their participation is mediated by the *mukaddams* (brokers cum labour supervisors). A few of the Pardhi workers have graduated to become mukaddams who act as an interface between labour contractors and the Pardhi casual labourers. They are more likely to own fairly larger tool kits and lend them to members of their work parties in case the latter face a shortage. There are six active mukaddams in Jai Ambe Nagar. They make an oral agreement with the labour contractor with respect to the

number of workers needed, wage rate and number of days, mobilise the required amount of workers from the settlement itself and supply them to the worksite. Apart from seeking work, mukaddams ensure timely release of the amount that has to be distributed among the workers from the labour contractor. A mukaddam usually retains 8-10% of the wage received by the worker as commission. A mukaddam prefers piece-wage work since the earnings per worker are the highest in this kind of work, which translates into greater commission for them. Despite the commissions cut from their wages, the workers prefer going through the mukaddam rather than seeking work on their own because he is a one-stop reference point for information on availability of work, provision of work and receipt of wages.

All the mukaddams in Jai Ambe Nagar were males and have worked as labourers in the past. It is generally agreed that the financial position of the household improves once one of its members becomes a mukaddam. It improves the chances of other working members in getting work. However, the mukaddams themselves downplay the benefits of their position and narrate the problems faced by them. They argue that their work carries many risks. In case of delay in receipt of money from the labour contractor, the mukaddams have to pay the workers from their own pockets, for which they often have to borrow money. One of them explained, "Workers are not always patient. If they have worked for a week they demand the money at the week-end itself and quarrel with us if they do not get it."

The workers acknowledge the risks and difficulties faced by the mukaddams in organising work parties and securing payment from the labour contractors. Thus, in case of delay in payment or lesser payment received than what was agreed upon before the work started, the workers cooperate with the mukaddam in either taking joint action against the erring party or arriving at a compromise. The workers' efforts also influence the mukaddams' chances of getting work from the same labour contractor in future. But the antagonism between the mukaddams and the workers is also conspicuous. Delay in payment is the most common trigger for quarrels between them. On a typical Sunday morning, the day of the week when workers take voluntary off and expect to be paid wages for the work done in last six days, they surround the mukaddams and, in case of an intentional breach of trust or the perception of the same, heated arguments followed by loud fist fights interspersed with curses erupt. In some instances, workers took the assets belonging to the mukaddam like television sets, handcarts, etc, and refused to part with them until their grievances were redressed. The frustration felt due to the uncertainty and irregularity of wage payment is adequately revealed in the following diatribe expressed by a worker in an inebriated state:

Here (in Jai Ambe Nagar) even the *taporilog* (slang for rowdies) and illiterate folk have become mukaddams. They pass on very little to the workers... The mukaddams and the seths (labour contractor) connive with each other to cheat the workers... if we get Rs 70 then the mukaddam keeps Rs 30 for himself. Hamara khun chuste hain (they suck our blood) ...it is necessary to put them in jail...

...so what if the mukaddams are also from the Pardhi jat? Their main aim is to maximise benefits for themselves and their children...while even our children slog in the gutter, these mukaddams do not work but

simply give us orders...these mukaddams are very harami (parasitic). I do not want to become a mukaddam. I want to remain a beggar. Hum kaam karke khayenge (we will feed ourselves by working).

Irregular wage employment and wage payment introduces uncertainty and irregularity in their household income. This makes the task of calculating monthly household income tenuous. Many respondents had difficulty in recollecting information on the amount of work done and income earned. The respondents showed great discomfort when asked about their earnings through scrap collection, since this activity is normally associated with thefts of cable wires, manhole covers and other metal attachments. But it was clear that none of the Pardhi households earned enough to meet their daily and basic necessities. That is why almost all of them were found to be in debt.

Consumption Expenditure and Standard of Living

Consumption expenditure reflects the cost incurred to maintain a living. Food is the most important item in the consumption basket of the Pardhis. Expenditure on food items constitutes around half the total expenditure of the household. Nearly one-third of total expenditure on food items is incurred on purchasing cereals. This happens despite the fact that cereals such as rice and wheat are supposed to be distributed among them at subsidised rates in the fair price shops under the targeted public distribution system (PDS). All the Pardhi households have a saffron ration card⁸ and one household can purchase a maximum of 35 kgs of foodgrains at the rate of Rs 7 per kg of wheat and Rs 9.50 per kg of rice.⁹ But many respondents complained that they receive cereals once every three to four months. Moreover, they do not get the specified amount nor do they get it at the subsidised rates mentioned above. Thus, they have to purchase the cereals from the open market, paying more than triple the rate offered at the fair price shops.¹⁰ The aberration in the services of the PDS means that Pardhis are chronically on the verge of food insecurity and a number of them do not manage to secure even two square meals during all the seasons.

Liquor and tobacco may be regarded as non-essential, but they are integral to the consumption basket of a Pardhi household and account for a significant portion of monthly consumption expenditure. Tobacco is consumed by both men and women whereas liquor is consumed only by men in the Pardhi community. The expenditure on liquor strains the family budget. Domestic conflicts on decisions regarding liquor expenses are a routine occurrence.

Medical expenses are another important component of the expenditure. The Pardhis usually avail the services of a nearby private clinic. Out of the three caesarean deliveries done among the Pardhi households included in the sample during the fieldwork period, two were at a private hospital. Though the Pardhis are aware of the high costs of accessing private healthcare, they are compelled to do so because of the unresponsive and non-cooperative nature of the public hospital staff (a government hospital is situated nearby). Moreover, even at this government hospital basic medicines are not offered and have to be purchased from the open market.

Expenses on drinking water, electricity, communication and transport also command a significant proportion of the household's total expenditure. There is no nearby source of drinking water. Most Pardhi households buy water from illegal water suppliers everyday at the rate of Rs 15-20 per 20 litres. For the less immediate purposes like bathing and washing, they source water from a nearby gutter. Like water, electricity is also not supplied by the state to the Pardhi settlement though the demand is high. Some of them reported stealing electricity from the nearby street-light poles, and some households reported paying a distributor of illegal electricity to avail of the facility. For an average Pardhi household, the distance between residence and workplace translates into significant transport costs. To cut down on recurring transport costs, many Pardhi families have purchased cycles. Expense under the head of communication is significantly higher among the mukaddams due to the nature of their work. The Pardhi households do not spend much on housing because they use only plastic sheets and bamboo sticks to build a house once a year. The average monthly expenditure of the Pardhis on education is lowest among all the items of expenditure. There is a municipal school nearby which provides education free of cost. For pre-primary education, there is a kindergarten within the settlement run free by an external non-profit agency. However, despite this, school enrolment ratio among the Pardhi children is very poor.

Socio-religious expenditure also accounts for a significant part of the total household expenditure. Contribution towards *joharna* (the annual festival of the religious deity of the Pardhis) is an important component of this expenditure. But the amount and frequency of expenditure within an average Pardhi household has lately begun to shift in favour of annual religious pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi.¹¹ At the time of data collection, more families had visited Vaishno Devi in the preceeding year than their *muluk* (native place) for the purpose of *joharna*.

Asset Ownership

For an outsider, estimation of the asset ownership of a Pardhi household is an easy task. The makeshift houses or tents of the Pardhis which are built without doors are the main store-places of durable belongings. Therefore, it is easy to get responses on the composition of the physical asset base of the Pardhi household. Some items which are of immediate necessity such as utensils, plastic containers for carrying water, mats, a couple of coversheets, and one or two small storage boxes with a lock, are possessed by each household. Apart from makeshift houses another place of storage is an underground, dried-up gutter amidst the crowd of tents. In this communal storage space, the Pardhis store bamboo sticks and plastics which are the main material for building tents and most vulnerable to theft from outsiders. The physical assets which reveal conspicuous wealth differences among Pardhis are land, ornaments, income-generating equipments, equipments for transport and communication, means of entertainment and financial assets.¹²

Landlessness is quite widespread. Only two households reported owning some land in their native place. Of these two, one household owned it jointly with relatives. However, due to

irregular rainfall and financial inability to purchase required inputs for cultivation, these landowning households also migrated to Mumbai. The Pardhis could not avail of benefits from the government provision of granting ownership title to the landless among the STs and SCs in rural areas, because this provision requires a minimum duration of stay in a particular village or hamlet. This requirement could not be met by the Pardhis because they have been traditionally engaged in nomadism as a means of sustenance, and because of the persistently itinerant nature of their life they have been deprived of this provision. Another important asset is ornaments, either of gold or silver. More than three-fourths of the Pardhi households have some ornaments. It is the quantity of the ornaments that brings about differences among them. It is very important for the Pardhis because it is the main security offered while borrowing from the *sonar* (moneylender).

Most of the Pardhi households own income-generating or hiring out labour-related assets. These assets are in the form of simple hand tools like lump hammer, mattock, pickaxe, shovel spades, iron pans to carry mud, mortar and stones and wheelbarrow. The wheelbarrow is the most expensive equipment and is used not only at worksites but also for domestic chores like carrying cans of water. Around half of the general households and most of the mukaddam households own it. Moreover, the mukaddams possess more tools than the ordinary Pardhis for the purpose of lending the spare ones to those in his work party who may not have the required equipment.

The Pardhis also own equipments related to transport, communication and entertainment. A greater proportion of households own a cycle. Around a quarter of them also have a mobile phone. However, most of the mukaddams own mobile phones. Since they skip daily visits to the worksite on most days, a mobile phone is an essential component of their work. Around half of the Pardhi households own television sets. Not less than two-thirds of the Pardhi households own either a television or a tape recorder or both. However, the television set is the most important source of entertainment for the Pardhi households.

Borrowing and Indebtedness

Ownership of financial assets among the Pardhis is almost non-existent. Since few work opportunities are available, the Pardhis use up all the income earned for consumption. Thus, absence of savings or negative savings is common among Pardhis. Due to uncertainty vis-à-vis work opportunities and wage payments, money that does get saved occasionally generally remains as cash in hand. None of the Pardhis, except the mukaddams, have bank accounts. The amount to be distributed as wages among the workers is credited to the mukaddam's account by the owner or labour contractor. It helps them to facilitate distribution of wages among workers and ensure safety of money. At the time of the fieldwork none of the mukaddams had savings in their account.

Almost all the Pardhi households were found to be in debt. The average debt per household was estimated around Rs 12,500. The average debt of the mukaddam households exceeded that of the ordinary Pardhi households by almost 50%. Due to the

unpredictability associated with the release of wages to workers from the labour contractor, the mukaddams often have to take loans to pay the members of their work groups leading to considerable burden on the finances of a mukaddam household. The frequent and large amount of borrowing undertaken by the mukaddams usually from the moneylender carries high interest rates.

Loans are transacted among the Pardhis in terms of cash. In both indebted casual labourer households and mukaddam households, medical expenses are the main and significant contributor to their indebtedness. The frequency of borrowing for health purposes is also the highest. Thus, ill health is the main reason that pushes a Pardhi household towards a high level of indebtedness. After health, expenditure on food and other daily expenses are the most important reasons for borrowing. The loans taken under this head are of relatively smaller amounts compared to those taken for medical and religious purposes. The borrowing and repaying of the loan is done almost on a regular basis.

All the loans are borrowed from non-institutional credit sources, that is, from relatives and the moneylender. The incidence of borrowing and lending small amounts of loans is most frequent within the kin-group. These small loans are utilised for meeting day to day expenses. The advantage of borrowing from relatives is that there is no demand for collateral security attached and the repayment schedule is flexible. More loans were taken from distant relatives than immediate kin. The Pardhis acknowledge the limits to seeking financial aid from relatives. To avoid ill feelings between families over borrowing and to obtain larger loans, say the ones taken to meet medical expenses, the Pardhis approach traditional moneylenders for loans. Almost all the Pardhis in the settlement borrow from a moneylender located close by. The loan is taken against gold or silver jewellery. The interest rate charged is not less than 3% per month or 36% per annum.¹³ Thus not only is the interest rate exorbitant but the arrangement also imposes greater burden of indebtedness on the borrower than what is evident on the surface.

Social Embeddedness of Economic Life

The multiplicity of economic activities undertaken by the Pardhis takes place in a sociocultural setting consisting of a complexity of social relations. In this section, the attempt is to examine the social relations that have a strong effect on their economic life. In this context, the paper reflects on the kinship relations and their bearing on the nature and level of social embeddedness of economic action of the Pardhis. It is observed that the kinship relations create a set of occasions which delineate the possibilities of and limits to the economic actions of the Pardhis.

Kinship Character of Migration and Settlement within the City: Migration to and settlement within the city has a very strong kinship element. The unit of migration to the city and within the city is never an individual but a family phenomenon among Pardhis. A Pardhi nuclear family, whether settled in the periphery of a village or periodically moving from one place to another in search of livelihood, always lives with other families of close kinship. The same characteristic is exhibited among the Pardhis who have migrated and settled in Mumbai. The anxiety

associated with migration is partly cushioned by the kin network already established in Mumbai. It is the kinship group that inducts the newly-arrived migrants into the city life. The newly migrated Pardhi family usually takes up residence with their relatives already settled in the city and generally joins the work in which their relatives are already involved. They are introduced to a mukaddam so that they can take up wage work on a regular basis. The migrants are taught the nuances of a trade like garland making and how to sell them to earn a living.

The Pardhis report that their settlement in Jai Ambe Nagar is a conglomeration of all the relatives that they have in Mumbai. Therefore, the network of kinship-ties among them is extremely dense. All the Pardhis trace their origin to a few villages in Parbhani district in Maharashtra. The existence of a dense network of kin ties among the Pardhis of Jai Ambe Nagar is not an outcome of coincidence. As narrated by many households, the story of the Pardhi enclave at Jai Ambe Nagar began in 1999 with the demolition of a slum in Garodia Nagar (located close to Jai Ambe Nagar) to release land for construction of a mall. Consequently, the Pardhi families, which had resided there for many years, found themselves wandering to different places within the city. After two months of staying at the worksite in different locales, some of them arrived at the current site of Jai Ambe Nagar which was more or less an open stretch of barren land. They settled here and then asked their relatives staying in native places and other Pardhi enclaves in the city to join them. Gradually, a cluster of households belonging to a kin group coalesced into a Pardhi enclave.

The institution of kinship is also a basis of seasonal migration. Relatives of Pardhis migrate to Jai Ambe Nagar from January-end onwards until May and pitch their ramshackle tents in the settlement next to their kin. They start returning to their native places with the beginning of cultivation cycle towards the end of May. For these seasonal migrants, agriculture is the principal economic activity. They migrate to Mumbai to add up their agriculture income so that their economic life becomes sustainable. Consider the case of Godabai, the sister of a Pardhi mukaddam, who is a seasonal migrant to the city:

I come from a hamlet in Palam in Parbhani district. Back home, members of my extended family who live in the same hamlet jointly cultivate land. For this we had to take a loan from a source in muluk. In order to repay the loan we came to Mumbai to work as wage labourers. We have had poor rainfall for the past two years. The farm output levels have dropped and are insufficient to meet our sustenance needs throughout the year. Moreover, the debts incurred to buy inputs to cultivate the land are piling up. In muluk, wage work is not easily available and the wages paid are as low as Rs 25 per day. Thus, we come to Mumbai with our families every year for four months. I stay with my brother in this settlement. He is a mukaddam and we work with him. Right now, much against our liking, we are engaged in gutter desilting work. But there is no other option. I hope to save enough for purchasing inputs for the farm when we begin cultivation this time.

Kinship, Neighbourhood and Organisation of Economic Activity: Though technically the working groups are organised on a voluntary basis and the mukaddam is under no formal obligation to retain the same set of workers for every work opportunity and the workers are also free to join other work

parties, kinship plays an important role. Most of the respondents expressed their preference for working with a mukaddam from within their kinship group. According to one labourer, "We mostly work with mukaddams who are our close relatives. We do not trust outsiders much since they may cheat us by disappearing with the money released for the payment of workers." Thus, trust associated with economic relations in this case arises from the kinship system.

The mukaddams also give preference to family or kinship group members. According to one mukaddam, "I prefer taking family members. Within immediate kin group I can manage to mobilise around 30-40 workers. This includes relatives from muluk who come to seek wage work in Mumbai for a temporary period." The reasons they cite for this preference are not solely attributable to obligation. Mukaddams are perceptive of the mistrust among workers towards them which becomes explicit during conflicts over delayed payment when some workers accuse them of withholding the money intentionally. A mukaddam's preference for workers from his family or kinship group to form a working party is also closely tied to the aim of blunting antagonism and conflict that may arise later.

It is not that the Pardhi labourers were not found to be working with the mukaddams from non-kinship groups or other communities. Nevertheless, the incidence of taking up work with such mukaddams is very low. Some Pardhi labourers reported that they have worked with mukaddams belonging to the Wadari community in the past and expressed openness about entering into work relations with them in the future. A close observation revealed that the willingness to work with Wadari mukaddams is greater among the Pardhi labourers who live just next to the column of Wadari households in the settlement. One of the Pardhi workers who had Wadari neighbours remarked, "It is not as if we feel comfortable only with Pardhi mukaddams. We also work with mukaddams from other communities who are known to us and with whom we regularly interact, so why not a Wadari mukaddam?" It was found that the regular interactions between the Pardhis and members of other communities happen when there is physical proximity among them. The same reason guides the decision of a Pardhi mukaddam to provide opportunities to members of other communities within the settlement. Thus, one can say that the institution of neighbourhood also affects the structuring of economic relationship among the Pardhis. However, this is not as significant as the institution of kinship.

Kinship Base of Borrowing and Lending

Kinship is an important source of security while coping with the rise in cost of living in the city compounded by the uncertainty and risk attached with the informal sector in terms of availability of work and payment of wages. Due to irregularity of payment of wages and lack of savings, Pardhi households face frequent shortfalls of cash to meet even daily expenses. In such a situation, the incidence of borrowing and lending small loans is frequent among the Pardhis belonging to the same kinship group. A lender in the present is likely to be a borrower in future and a present borrower is obligated to return the favour by

extending financial aid to the other party in the future. Non-cooperation invites open disapproval, increases tensions and makes social relations fragile. Lending and borrowing between the members of the kinship group are restricted to small amounts without any strings (interest rate, specified term for repayment and demand for collateral security) attached. These practices represent the functional interdependence of Pardhis in a social milieu where “mechanical solidarity” is a paramount force of cohesion. The basis of trust within the Pardhi community is the normative framework of the community. Trust gets further consolidated when the individuals engage in a sequence of transactions with each other, and it emerges as an important generalised asset and arrests the chances of opportunism.¹⁴

Conclusions

Louis Wirth in his celebrated work writes that “Social organisation under the influence of urbanism would display the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, and the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of the neighbourhood, and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity” (Wirth 1938: 20-21). So, migration to a metropolis, integration into the capitalist system through participation in informal economy and higher density of economic linkages with different groups or communities within the city should have brought about conceptual change and development in the lifeworld of the Pardhis. However, the economic life of the Pardhis and its social framework reflects tendencies of forced adaptation to the plurality of forces unleashed by the urban setting that has not resulted into significant changes in their traditional institutions and practices. Structures and normative orientations of the traditional order still persist among them and on many occasions get reinforced due to the interplay of different urban situations. Kinship has remained an idiom through which many relations are conceptualised and many transactions are negotiated in the Pardhi community. In fact, the Pardhis have coalesced as a collective by reinforcing the kin or family ties through their residence and work in the urban space. But it should also be noted that the enjoinder of the individual to her kin group is not completely attributable to a traditional moral framework or strong sentiments arising out of living together for generations. Reliance on kin ties is also an instrumental function of self-sustenance and self-advancement. It assures some security for the Pardhis, both physical and financial, in an insecure situation created by a fluid urban social milieu, a volatile nature of urban economy and a highly bureaucratic and corrupt state’s order-enforcing apparatuses.

In Louis Wirth’s construction of urbanism, the city is the symbol of modern and democratic space that generates levelling influences and caters to the needs of people of different social divisions. To quote him,

When large numbers have to make common use of facilities and institutions, an arrangement must be made to adjust the facilities and institutions to the needs of the average person rather than to those of particular individuals. The services of the public utilities, of the

recreational, educational, and cultural institutions must be adjusted to mass requirements.... If the individual would participate at all in the social, political, and economic life of the city, he must subordinate some of his individuality to the demands of the larger community and in that measure immerse himself in mass movements (Wirth 1938: 18).

However, Mumbai, a city with a rich industrial background, does not confirm this thesis. It has witnessed a radical shift towards “revanchism”, that is, a systematic planning oriented towards banishing the marginalised sections of the city to the urban periphery or outside the urban area, particularly during the post-liberalisation years.¹⁵ As Swapana Banerjee-Guha (2002: 122) writes,

Mumbai’s policy became proactive in making the city a significant centre of finance, services and Transnational Corporation headquarters at the cost of industrial decline in many areas. The poor were pushed out from old industrial cores to the outskirts, ghettoised in peripheral slums leading to massive intra-city migration. The urban landscape experienced a rapid transformation with work becoming increasingly informal.

Intra-city relocations due to demolitions – at times to make way for malls, at times for expansion of infrastructure projects – have been part of the urban experience for most Pardhi households. In many ways, the Pardhi enclave in Jai Ambe Nagar, which has been in fact a product of their eviction from the Mumbai district, signifies their strategy to survive the ongoing expansion of the revanchist restructuring of the urban space. Their enclave in Jai Ambe Nagar is physically located in the eastern suburbs of the city where the real estate activity has only recently started poaching spaces. However, with a lot of efforts and struggles they have managed to hold this base for more than a decade.

But the removal from Jai Ambe Nagar is a possibility considered imminent by many Pardhis and has ignited fears of uprooting without rehabilitation. Every Pardhi listed housing as the immediate concern and expectation from the government. Rajubhau, who has spent more than 20 years with his family in the city, iterated in frustration, “We want a place from where we will not be kicked out again...if we have a space of our own we will somehow manage to earn a livelihood and survive.”¹⁶ For Pardhis, the livelihood prospects are intricately connected to the place of residence. They have also expressed concern over the possibility of being rehabilitated in those areas where wage work will not be easily available.¹⁷ Since an adult Pardhi of Jai Ambe Nagar has on an average spent 17 years in Mumbai, the community is seeking formal recognition of its right to utilise urban space for the purpose of living and livelihood generation. Besides, it has been observed that the Pardhis are no longer passive entities in a dynamic society despite the significance of the structural constraints that limit their choices. The Pardhis in Jai Ambe Nagar are getting acquainted with the problems of Pardhis in other settlements through voluntary participation in organisations like the Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan. With the help of civil society organisations they are charting new ways to confront the dominant ideology, market prerogatives and state apparatuses that are restructuring the urban space to their detriment. Thus, the organisation of their life in the city not only represents strategies of adaptation but also of resistance.

NOTES

- 1 Edward Said (1978) primarily developed the idea of orientalism. It is defined as a system of knowledge about Oriental societies based on a dichotomous model of the dynamic Occident and the static Orient. In this system of knowledge, we find an eternal ontological and epistemological separation of the Occident from the Orient. The Orient simply lacks the dynamic and positive elements of Occidental social formations. Orientalism describes the Orient in terms of Western desires or Occidental notions of history, nature, culture, religion, society, man, rationality, etc. and represented it in terms of alterity within which inferior characters are attributed to the Orient (Sahay 2007).
- 2 Johannes Fabian (1983) introduced the concept of allochronism – the creation of different temporalities in order to deny coevalness – to describe the deep-rooted practice of “denial of contemporaneity” of the ethnographic other with the representing subject and the consequent placing of that other in another time. The concept reflects on the practices of representation prevalent in anthropological discourse where the “denial of coevalness” was a device used systematically to legitimise knowledge accomplished by rendering contrasts between the dynamic present time of the researcher’s own culture and the timeless past in which other cultures were situated as objects of ethnographic gaze. Such practices of placing a time outside of the normal flow of time led to establish everlasting distance between western and non-western societies in terms of cultural alterity.
- 3 “The Great Transformation” is a seminal work by Karl Polanyi (1944). The title is often used as a phrase to signify the breakdown and transformation of a premodern society into a capitalist society.
- 4 Article 366(25) of the Constitution refers to scheduled tribes as those communities who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution. According to Article 342 of the Constitution, the scheduled tribes are those groups which have been declared as such by the president through a public notification.
- 5 This spectrum of criteria subsumes the definitions contained in 1931 Census, first Backward Classes Commission, 1955, or the Kaka Kalelkar Commission, the Advisory Committee on Revision of SC/ST lists which is known as Lokur Committee, 1965, and the Joint Committee of Parliament on the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes orders (Amendment) Bill 1967 (source: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. <http://tribal.nic.in/index1.html>).
- 6 In administrative terminology, “rural” is identified with revenue villages. The current administrative understanding of a standard “urban” area, specified first in 1971 Census, includes three elements: (i) it has a core town of a minimum population size of 50,000, (ii) the contiguous areas made up of other urban as well as rural administrative units have close mutual socio-economic links with the core town, and (iii) the probabilities are that this entire area will get fully urbanised in a period of two to three decades.
- 7 Free colonies are residential areas for persons discharged from settlements who were seen as fit to live a non-criminal life. Those released from settlements into free colonies on a licence were subject to be recalled to settlement in case of breach of conditions of the licence.
- 8 This reflects on a paradox in the system. As per the official guidelines, the Pardhis are supposed

to have Antyodaya cards since they are a primitive tribe consisting of poorest families amongst the below poverty line families. Households with Antyodaya cards can access cereals at less than 70% of the costs incurred on the same by the households with saffron ration card. But the administration has placed them above poverty line and issued them saffron ration card thinking per annum income of a Pardhi household is above Rs 15,000.

- 9 Notification of Food, Civil Supply and Consumer Protection Department on 1 June 1997, Government of Maharashtra.
- 10 This was one of the main grievances mentioned by Pardhi and Wadari households when collecting testimonies for the public hearing held in January 2010.
- 11 Unlike, *joharna*, the annual fair of the clan deity, which embodies activities that are specific to the sub-caste, pilgrimage to Vaishno Devi temple, located in Jammu and Kashmir state, is Pan-Hindu religious activity.
- 12 Property among the Pardhis is transferred through patrilineal succession.
- 13 As on February 2010, commercial banks were charging an interest rate of 12% per annum on personal loan.
- 14 New institutional economists have used game theory models to show how completely selfish materialists (who are motivated only by considerations of maximisation of individual gains) engage in sequence of transactions, it is in their interest to be both trusting and trustworthy. Thus, reciprocity-based trust in instances of repeated play emerges as a far-sighted strategy of rational individuals as against the desire to seek short-term gains of opportunism (Keefer and Knack 2003).
- 15 Derived from the French word *revanche*, meaning revenge, revanchist city was a concept coined by urban geographer Neil Smith (1996) in context of New York City wherein the 1990s witnessed a discourse of revenge against minorities, the working class, feminists, environmental activists, gays and lesbians and recent immigrants: the “public enemies” of the bourgeois political elite and their supporters. The concept has been applied to different urban contexts across the globe, including Mumbai, and serves as a useful explanation for the systematic out-of-sight displacement of the poor and the homeless during the age of neo-liberalism characterised by the absence of redistributive policy, affirmative action and anti-poverty legislation.
- 16 The Hindi word used by Rajubhau was “jagah” which I have translated as space. *Jagah* can also imply a house. Thus, their demand from the government is either to regularise the settlement at Jai Ambe Nagar or in case of relocation to other sites, provide them houses with ownership rights.
- 17 The Pardhis of Jai Ambe Nagar have on several occasions narrated the traumatic transformation of lives of some members of their community who were displaced from Vile Parle due to World Bank-funded Mumbai Urban Transport Project in 2005. The MMRDA (Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority) promised to provide free housing to the project-affected families who had been living in Mumbai since before 1995. In the interim period, the people were to stay at a Transition Camp at Mankhurd. Till January 2010, only a meagre proportion of families in Transit camp had acquired houses. The others not only face unsureness about their future, but are also waging a more intense struggle of daily sustenance than what they were when residing in Vile Parle. The government’s intervention in rehabilitation, at least in context of

Mumbai, is not aligned to the principle of redistributive justice, but appears to be a mechanism to contain the increasing unrestiveness among the victims of revanchism.

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